

# CREATED EQUAL: AMERICA'S CIVIL RIGHTS STRUGGLE

The Abolitionists ❖ Slavery by Another Name ❖ The Loving Story ❖ Freedom Riders

## 3. Toolkit for Facilitated Discussions

### Introduction

*Created Equal: America's Civil Rights Struggle* is a national public programming initiative using four award-winning documentary films as catalysts for screening and discussion events at public and academic libraries, museums, historical societies, and community and faith-based organizations across the United States. *Created Equal* draws upon deep scholarship and helps participants consider the long struggle for civil rights—from before the Civil War through the 1960s—as a continuing story that still resonates today. Through the lens of humanities scholarship, public conversation offers communities an opportunity for deeper reflection on the complex historical, political, and cultural themes explored in the four films.

Film can be a particularly effective format for prompting thoughtful discussion. The films included in this set provide a dramatic springboard for dialogue related to key social and political themes of this century. As you develop your programming, you can encourage further exploration of the ideas and issues by directing participants to the *Created Equal* website and sharing the additional reading list included in this Guide.

To host facilitated community conversations, a host site need only have a meeting area, equipment to screen films, and—most importantly—an audience. The host site is responsible for identifying and working with a scholar/discussion facilitator and with local partners, organizations, agencies, and groups whose constituents have a special interest in the series' subject.

This Toolkit provides ideas for planning and implementing public discussion programs in conjunction with the film set.

### Steps to Follow:

- Determine the need and interest
- Determine the goal of your series
- Define your target audience
- Form a planning committee
- Recruit community partners
- Identify scholars to participate in the programming
- Plan the evaluation strategy
- Select the date/time for your series
- Promote your event
- Evaluate the success of your programs
- Share stories of impact

### Programming Formats

The goal of the *Created Equal* initiative is to encourage open conversations about how the long history of civil rights continues to resonate today. Sites are encouraged to develop public programs such as moderated discussions based on clips from one or more of the films.

Recognizing that people have limited time and may not view all four films in their entirety, this format allows participants to connect the themes that carry through all the films.

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**Model Thematic Discussion Plan** (developed by the New York Council for the Humanities): You can build your programs around major themes that resonate among the films: equality under the law; grassroots protest and legislation; and non-violence to achieve change.

## Option A

Begin a thematic viewing series with a panel discussion and clips from all four films. Consider hosting full film screenings in between discussions for those who aren't able to watch the films on their own, stretching your series from four sessions to eight. Or, at the first session, hand out information to participants on how to watch the films on their own (online, at your venue, etc.).

- |           |   |
|-----------|---|
| Session 1 | Clips from all four films. Introductory panel discussion on the three themes: equality under the law; grassroots protest and legislation; and non-violence to achieve change. |
| Session 2 | Clips & facilitated discussion: <i>The Abolitionists</i> & <i>Freedom Riders</i> .<br>Discuss grassroots protest and legislation.   |
| Session 3 | Clips & facilitated discussion: <i>Slavery by Another Name</i> & <i>The Loving Story</i> .<br>Discuss equality under the law.   |
| Session 4 | Clips & facilitated discussion: <i>The Abolitionists</i> , <i>Freedom Riders</i> & <i>The Loving Story</i> .<br>Discuss non-violence to achieve change.                       |

## Option B

Host a shorter series focused on one of the three themes in one particular historical era. Combine a one-hour screening of a single film in the set with a 30-minute scholar-facilitated discussion.

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|-----------|---|
| Session 1 | Screening of <i>The Abolitionists</i><br>Facilitated discussion       |
| Session 2 | Screening of <i>Slavery by Another Name</i><br>Facilitated discussion |
| Session 3 | Screening of <i>The Loving Story</i><br>Facilitated discussion        |
| Session 4 | Screening of <i>Freedom Riders</i><br>Facilitated discussion          |

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## Example of Single-Session 90-minute discussion plan

Use the welcome script provided in this Toolkit to open the event.

Use a simple opening exercise to welcome everyone and get them thinking about the topic and the theme. Asking a quick question that everyone has to respond to ensures that each participant gets a chance to share his or her voice with the group. Show one or two brief film clips that get to the heart of the matter; use active viewing strategies to help viewers find evidence they can use later in the discussion. Devote the bulk of your time to conversation. Close with a question that asks everyone to connect the ideas of the discussion to direct civic participation in the community and take the ideas “beyond the room”.

### **10 minutes      Introduction & Starting to Think about the Topic**

- Introductions should be *very* brief: everyone states their first name and a response to a simple open-ended question.
- Ask for a one-word or brief response to a question related to the theme.

### **20 minutes      Watch 1–2 film clips, totaling no more than 10 minutes each**

Screen one or two film clips that focus on the theme of the discussion. Consider introducing an active viewing strategy to focus the group on the themes you will explore later in the discussion.

- Have half of the room listen for the consequences the protagonists faced when they made the decision to act. Have the other half of the room watch for how their actions impacted others.
- Ask participants to pay attention to the difficult decisions the protagonists had to face. Have the audience think about what motivated them to keep going.

### **5 minutes      Check comprehension**

Are there any phrases that need further clarification? Any people, organizations, or historical facts that need a bit of explanation so that everyone feels comfortable before starting the discussion?

### **45 minutes      Discuss!**

Focus on interpretive and evaluative questions:

- Interpretive questions focus on quotes or actions: What did John Brown mean when he called efforts to eliminate slavery through non-violence “milk and water” abolition?
- Evaluative questions focus on connections to today: What do you think about what he said/did? How does this idea/action continue to impact our community today?

### **10 minutes      Bring it back to the present**

Draw the conversation to a close by asking people to think about how the theme of or the ideas in the film relate to their community.

- Yes or No: Do you think people today would have the courage to do what they did in the film?
- Who is one person you plan to tell about tonight's conversation?
- Do you believe a strategy of non-violence would help your community address issues under debate today?

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## Scholar/Discussion Leader Guidelines

Scholars serve as moderators for the programs, providing background and facilitating discussions. They foster an accepting atmosphere to encourage the free exchange of ideas and responses to the films, text, and personal experiences. Someone with great expertise in his/her subject may not be as good a facilitator as a scholar who has teaching experience and personal interest in the subject plus good facilitation skills. The short time allotted for the scholars' presentations requires that they be more facilitators than lecturers and that they focus on participants' responses as the basis of discussion.

### **The responsibilities of the scholar should include:**

- Reviewing the overall approach to the series material and the specific theme concepts developed for the series.
- Reviewing all films and text for series. It is imperative that he or she view each film in full prior to screening. In addition, the scholar should be familiar with the film content and prepared to address it with the audience.
- Providing a 10–15 minute introduction to each program.
- Preparing several discussion questions that will be posed to the group at large or in small groups.
- Circulating throughout the room to answer questions, make comments, and listen to what is said in the small-group discussions.
- Briefly highlighting important ideas expressed in small-group discussions as a way to close the program.

### **Scholars should keep in mind four important points as they prepare to lead a series:**

1. Out-of-school adults will make up most of the audience. Developing the discussions for this series differs from the classroom, as your audience brings a life experience to the series different from that of the usual student.
2. The presentation is a catalyst for discussion rather than a definitive explanation of the program's subject. The scholar is the participants' guide and the focus of the program is on their discussion.
3. The films viewed at the programs are important for their artistry as well as their content, and scholars should help the audiences understand why the films are effective in presenting the material.
4. For scholars experienced in reading-and-discussion programs, a viewing-and-discussion program is somewhat different in that the material is being absorbed on-the-spot. Good film engages the emotions, so be prepared for a more immediate emotional response to the material than in a book-discussion format.

### **Discussing Sensitive Issues**

The end of slavery in the United States is the most important turning point in American constitutional, political, and social history. The legacies of emancipation will be with us forever, forcing us to face who we believe we are as a people. In the twenty-first century, issues of race and equality under the law continue to be the subject of vigorous and sometimes divisive debates. As you plan programs, we suggest that you frame the conversation by noting that democracy is an ongoing endeavor and unfinished business. These discussions are important because they invite participants to consider how we may work together to realize the goal of a more perfect union.

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## Tips for facilitating an inclusive and respectful conversation:

- 1. Set ground rules for discussion.** Establish strong expectations about the content and manner of communication. The material may elicit strong reactions. Encourage the attendees to listen to each other's views.
- 2. Be aware of your own attitudes.** Consider your own biases as you watch and review the content of the films.
- 3. Recognize and acknowledge the diversity of opinions and backgrounds of the audience.** Participants bring an array of experiences to the conversation. Foster a sense of community by going around the room and asking each participant to give his or her name and one sentence about why he or she is interested in the topic.
- 4. State objectives for the discussion.** Connect the discussion about the films to themes of the initiative: equality under the law; grassroots protest and legislation; and nonviolence to achieve change.
- 5. Use the films as the basis for discussion.** All attendees have a common point of reference for participation in conversation that arises from issues in the film.
- 6. The role of a facilitator.** Engage the group in the conversation rather than create a back-and-forth dialogue between the facilitator and one participant. Be open to all perspectives.
- 7. Pose good questions.** Good questions help guide the conversation toward a theme and keep the discussion focused on the film while allowing participants to make connections to their personal lives and the world around them.
- 8. Foster civility and the need for respect.** Focus the discussion on the topic, not the individual. Do not personalize the exchanges or the comments. Foster an environment of debate and dialogue in which it is OK to disagree.
- 9. Be prepared for tense moments.** Even if you do not think there will be a reaction to an issue you raise, plan ahead what you will do if you encounter one.
- 10. Summarize and establish next steps.** As you bring the program to a close, encourage participants to discuss some of the issues and the content of the films with friends and family in their community.

## Types of Questions (developed by New York Council for the Humanities)

Film-based conversations usually utilize four types of questions: factual, interpretive, evaluative, and follow-up questions.

**Factual questions** have one correct answer and focus on comprehending the film. Factual questions can be used to establish the main narrative, to gather evidence for specific arguments, and to settle disagreements about what actually occurred in the film. They can become a problem, though, if they are used to test the participants' knowledge. Asking too many factual questions can give the conversation a classroom feel: the facilitator can seem like a teacher quizzing her students rather than someone who is interested in what the group thinks about the film.

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## Examples of factual questions:

- According to William Lloyd Garrison, why was slavery rejected by the Constitution?
- Why did the Freedom Riders choose to ride buses to challenge segregation?

Conversations should be open to anyone who chooses to participate, so try to avoid factual questions that cannot be answered by the film, such as those that draw upon historical context or knowledge. Background information should be introduced only when it is critical to understanding an important idea in the film and should be kept to just a few key points.

**Interpretive questions** ask participants to consider the meaning of the film. Interpretive questions are based on what is presented in the film and often are formed around the “snag points” that caught your attention and made you want to ask for other points of view.

## Example of interpretive questions:

- What did John Brown mean when he called efforts to eliminate slavery through non-violence “milk and water” abolition?

**Evaluative questions** explore the themes of the film and call on the participants to evaluate the film narrative. In other words, do participants agree or disagree with the actions or events in the film?

## Examples of evaluative questions:

- Why do you think ordinary people become activists?
- In the film, how did African Americans struggle to control their own lives?
- Do you think *Slavery by Another Name* is an accurate title for the film?

Factual, interpretive, and evaluative questions should build on one another. **Follow-up questions** are vital to building the conversation. They are the links that help participants consider what others are saying while also refining their own ideas. Follow-up questions get people to talk to each other, rather than just back and forth with the facilitator. Follow-up questions focus on connections to today: What do you think about what he said/did? How does this idea/action continue to impact our community today?

**Sample Discussion Questions on Non-Violence for *Freedom Riders*** (prepared by the New York Council for the Humanities)

**Film Clip, Attack on bus in Anniston, AL:** 20:12 - 30:00

**Active Viewing Strategy:** Before starting the clip, tell the group they will be watching a clip about the leg of the trip between Atlanta and Birmingham. Divide the group in half; ask one half to focus on the risks the Freedom Riders faced in the clip, and ask the other half to focus on the ways their actions affected others.

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## Suggested Discussion Questions

- The Freedom Riders deliberately violated segregation laws. Why did the Freedom Riders choose non-violent means to effect change? Is civil disobedience a core American value?
- In this clip, how did the Freedom Riders impact others? What do you think of their actions?
- What were some of the different risks Freedom Riders took? How did risks differ, if at all, depending on whether they were black or white? Were there times when people surrounding the Freedom Riders (journalists, onlookers, families, etc.) took risks?
- Early in the film, a white woman defending segregation says, "You cannot change a way of life overnight." Can change take place through spontaneous acts, in one moment? Or is lasting change always the result of sustained effort? What, if any, is the nature of those distinctions?
- Why do think the filmmaker focused on the young white girl whose father owned the grocery store?
- Does your community have connections to the Freedom Riders? If so, how? How is this story remembered (or not remembered) today?
- Are there contemporary issues that are being addressed through non-violent group action?
- Do you think it was significant that the Freedom Riders acted as a group, rather than as individuals? Why or why not?

## Additional Programming Suggestions

Listed below are a series of prompts and suggestions meant to start public conversations.

- Contact local historians in your community and invite them to present a lecture or workshop regarding their particular expertise in African American history and civil rights.
- Identify people in your community who have family stories, memories, diaries, and artifacts from the Civil Rights Movement. Create related exhibits or ask them to speak at the program. You may also wish to ask to record their stories.
- Host a series of public readings of documents regarding abolitionists, slavery, and/or civil rights spanning the time period of the films from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Invite an actor or teacher to read a series of documents, ranging from speeches and diaries, to excerpts from other primary sources.
- Plan programs around the themes of *Created Equal* with a particular relevance to your community (e.g., the Abolition Movement in New York State, the Bus Boycotts in the South, the March on Washington, DC, *Brown v. Board of Education* in Kansas, Student Protests in California, etc.). Who was involved? What was the most prominent concern for these people? What were the primary political attitudes? How did local newspapers cover national politics and local events?
- Hold book discussions focusing on biographies and autobiographies of well-known historical figures related to *Created Equal*.
- Hold a public debate on the causes and effects of the abolition movement, segregation and integration, and the Civil Rights Movement based on the films and/or suggested readings.

Visit the "For Teachers" section on the *Created Equal* website, [www.createdequal.neh.gov](http://www.createdequal.neh.gov).

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## Sample *Created Equal* Program Introduction

### Welcome and Introductions (5–10 minutes)

Good (afternoon/evening) and welcome to the [name of institution]. I am [name and title]. We're delighted to have you here for today's event, [title of program].

Four powerful films funded by NEH, *The Abolitionists*, *Slavery by Another Name*, *The Loving Story*, and *Freedom Riders*, connect the stories of America's long civil rights movement. Deeply grounded in humanities scholarship, these films tell a remarkable story about the importance of race in the making of American democracy, about the power of individuals to effect change, and about the historical contexts in which Americans have understood and struggled with ideas of freedom, equality, and citizenship.

[Acknowledge any community partners and any local funders involved in the event.]

[Welcome any special guests, administrators, etc.]

Tonight's program is [program subject]. The film(s) we will be viewing tonight (is/are) [name of film(s)].

[Go over format and let people know what to expect.]

We're honored to have a highly qualified scholar to lead us in this series.

Dr./Mr./Ms. \_\_\_\_\_ received his/her [graduate] degree in \_\_\_\_\_ from \_\_\_\_\_.

He/she is currently [title and institution]. Some of Dr./Mr./Ms. \_\_\_\_\_'s publications include [short list].

Please help me welcome Dr./Mr./Ms. \_\_\_\_\_.

REMEMBER TO SMILE AND LEAD THE APPLAUSE FOR THE SCHOLAR

### Wrap Up (10–15 minutes)

Closing comments by scholar.

*Project director thanks the participants and scholar, distributes and collects evaluations, gives instructions for next session, and makes other announcements.*